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Self-Dispossessing Possessors. Businessmen and Salesmen in Eugene O'Neill's Fictional America

Annalisa Brugnoli

1 Upon reading Eugene O'Neill, one would hardly think that a playwright traditionally regarded as uncommitted and aloof in his self-absorbed isolation lived through a crucial phase of American history. Born during the Gilded Age, his father being one of the numberless immigrants enticed to America by what would soon be termed the American Dream, O'Neill blossomed as a popular playwright in the Roaring Twenties, overcame the Great Depression, and in the '40s developed a "war-obsession" (qtd. in Black 438) that influential biographers such as Louis Sheaffer and Stephen Black inevitably connect to the hopelessness that pervades his late masterpieces. Those were the years when O'Neill also outlined what Virginia Floyd calls his "antitotalitarian play[s]" (xxxv): "The Last Conquest", a half-autobiographical half-historical "World-Dictator fantasy" (319), and "Blind Alley Guy", focusing on the upbringing of a young "Hitler-like gangster" (355). Eventually, however, O'Neill put aside both drafts

> blocked by [...] a feeling in myself that until this war, which must be won, is won, people should concentrate on the grim surface and not admit the still grimmer, soul-disturbing depths. (qtd. in Floyd xxi)

2 Still, the soul that appeared to be most disturbed by those depths was ostensibly the playwright's own, as it was often the case whenever O'Neill tried to inject "public issues" into the "private tensions" (Roudané) of his ghost-ridden existence. "Human kind cannot bear too much reality" (Eliot 271), nor could O'Neill tolerate the intrusion of too much of it in his plays. Such anxiety about the real ostensibly contributed to spoiling plays like *The Fountain* and *Marco Millions*, and also undermined *The Great God Brown* and *Days Without End*, all completed between the '20s and the early 30s and touching on acquisitiveness as the dooming curse of Western civilization. Its final expression, however, is to be found in O'Neill's unsuccessful attempt, throughout the Depression decade, to complete the cycle of plays that was to become "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed". There, in no less than eleven plays, and through a time-

span that was to range from 1755 to 1932, O'Neill meant to portray a family of impoverished Irish immigrants, the Melodys, and the heirs of a wealthy Yankee lineage, the Hartfords, as they enmeshed and were eventually destroyed by their unrestrained acquisitive drive. For O'Neill, this meant exposing his personal views as to the "insatiable, unscrupulous greed for substitutes to fill the emptiness, the loss of love" (O'Neill, *Mansions* 3:534) that lies behind the "American desire to possess one's soul by possessing the world" (Bigsby 218), but also unburying ghosts from his own past. According to Fintan O'Toole, "what haunted Eugene O'Neill" (47) was, indeed, his Irish origin, which contemporary "so-called scientific racism" (49) connected with the alleged underlying bestiality of Irish immigrants. As the documentary sources—such as the vignettes by Thomas Nash and other cartoonists—quoted by O'Toole attest, the prejudice that immigrants were low in the evolutionary scale was quite popular in turn-of-the-century America. Hence the tendency to simianize the imagery of "Irish American Paddies" whose "pretense at being [...] evolved American[s]" (39) was then seen as a cover-up of their primitive and apelike nature. Still, In O'Toole's view, the simian Irishman and the rapacious American are not that far from each other.

> The apeman's ultimate legacy is American acquisitiveness. "There is nothing," says Sara [Hartford] "like hunger to make you greedy." The literal hunger that stripped the Irish down to their basic instincts becomes, in O'Neill's telling, the voracious American desire to own and control. (49)

3 I believe that this very intuition as to the connection that exists between the Irish immigrants as "hairy ape[s]" and the Americans as "self-dispossessing possessors" determined both the insight and the failure of O'Neill's attempt. Eventually unable to master a material that kept baffling him, the playwright chose to get rid of this troublesome cycle of plays. In Tony Kushner's words

> these were destroyed near the end of O'Neill's life, in a manuscript-burning episode before a hotel room fireplace that seems to have been part of a late, slightly disturbing reconciliation with his slightly disturbed third wife, Carlotta Monterey. *More Stately Mansions* might have frightened O'Neill away from further work on the cycle, or the immensity of the project may have frightened him. Mansions reveals the cycle's true nature; it's one of those illimitable, encyclopedic works, one of those monstrous inventions—*The Divine Comedy, Faust Part Two, The Human Comedy, In Search of Lost Time, The Man Without Qualities*—that can only be abandoned by its creator, never completed, an omnivorous fiction that devours its author's life.

4 With such a spectacular debacle, it is little wonder that both the author and his scholars have dismissed any involvement with the predicaments of the outer world ever since. As O'Toole points out, "Eugene O'Neill's artistic career moves backward" (47), for "[h]e starts with the human condition and ends with his own" (49). Indeed, if in early plays several characters show signs of topical concern, O'Neill's late masterpieces are almost invariably set in a timeless, obsessively autobiographical past. Even with a play like *Days Without End*, set in 1932 and featuring a businessman, John Loving's fleeting reference to the Depression serves mainly to account for the spare-time he can devote to "playing around" with his "literary bug" (3:116).

5 It is all the more surprising, then, that one of the latest books on O'Neill, John Patrick Diggins' *Eugene O'Neill's America*, published in 2007, focuses primarily on O'Neill's views regarding "frustrated desire as the problematic core of American democracy, simultaneously driving and undermining American ideals of progress, success, and individual freedom" (front flap). Keenly reacting to Eric Bentley's claim that O'Neill "has yet to show us he had a mind" (qtd. in Diggins 33), Diggins sets out to explore the

playwright's attitude towards his Irish legacy, contemporary race and gender issues, as well as towards pivotal political thinkers such as Mikhail Bakunin and Alexis de Tocqueville. I agree with Diggins when it comes to underscoring the centrality of O'Neill's concern with topical issues, whose troubled rendering I regard as a clue of their significance. O'Neill himself appears to have been fully aware of the momentous role played by what remains unspoken in consequence of someone's self-censorship. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he has Edmund, one of his doubles, maintain that "[s]tammering is the native eloquence of us fog people" (3:812). Correspondingly, I believe that those truths O'Neill could but stammer, prevented as he was from coping with them by his old "heebie-jeebies" (O'Neill, *Letters* 394), deserve attention, as they are no less revealing than his most celebrated achievements. Therefore, in the pages that follow, I will briefly analyze O'Neill's insightful, if dim, intuition as to the fundamental connection that exists between what Scott Sandage calls America's "ideology of achieved identity" (265), whose outcome is *either* tangible success *or* existential failure, and the self-dispossession that comes as a consequence of self-deception. Purposely questioning Wittgenstein's famous seventh proposition "What we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence", I will be concerning myself both with O'Neill's effort to parse issues of the American identity traditionally bound to remain inarticulate and unspoken, and with the self-censorship that ensued from this attempt. I will do this by outlining the development of two key figures that haunt both O'Neill's imagery and his country's identity quest, namely the businessman, who tries to buy his soul by "possessing the world", and the salesman, who is equally eager to sell his.

6 When he decided that he "want[ed] to be an artist or nothing" (qtd. in Gelbs 447), Eugene O'Neill was twenty-six, and, just like his politically involved youngish double-selves—Richard Miller, Edmund Tyrone, and Simon Hartford—he was in a phase of leftist and anarchist sympathy. It is not surprising, then, if the plays of his "*makings*-of-a-poet" (O'Neill, *Journey* 3:813) also feature several business people whose rendering is overtly spiteful to say the least. In *Thirst*, a 1913 one-act play, the first of them is bitingly sketched as "a fat, bald-headed, little man" who, in the middle of a shipwreck, is "still bewailing his broken appointment when a rush of the crowd swe[eps] him off his feet and into the sea" (1:38). In *Fog*, completed one year later, O'Neill has an all-too-autobiographical Poet confront a commonplace, self-centered, insensitive, clumsy, mean, narrow-minded Business Man, whom O'Neill initially calls The Other Man, thereby underscoring the Business Man's being the Other of himself. Unburdened of the constraints of civilization by his castaway condition, this Business Man, far from displaying any grace under pressure, immediately discards any pretense at affability and turns into a temperamental neurotic ready to do anything in order to save his life. Similarly, Mildred Douglas' conspicuously absent father in *The Hairy Ape*, the Polos in *Marco Millions*, Sam Evans in *Strange Interlude*, Simon Hartford's father in *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions*, and T. Stedman Harder in *A Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* are subsequent businessmen of unequal fortune and significance but of a similar perfunctory kind, insomuch as they are just living specimens of a money-oriented and shallow attitude O'Neill declaredly abhorred. When it comes to salesmen, a dimly outlined character called Adams in *Chris Christophersen* and the nameless salesman in *Ah, Wilderness!* clearly fulfill a similar role.

7 Thus, O'Neill was at the peak of what Harold Bloom calls "an heroic resentment" on the playwright's part for those faults he ascribed to "the New England Yankee tradition" (2) —with a fervor that, as Bloom remarks, is no less puritanical than the attitudes he

condemned—when he also began to develop a wholly different portrayal of businessmen and salesmen, one that no longer just labeled them as despicable monsters, but that was capable of new meanings and implications. Obsessed through his lifetime by the legend of Faust, O'Neill began to realize that the actual merchandise traded in business is the businessman's soul. Arthur Miller has Willy Loman say as much when he advises his son Biff not to "undersell [him]self. No less than fifteen thousand dollars" (67). Real-life Willy Lomans are also the subject of Scott Sandage's *Born Losers*, a book about "the story of America's unsung losers: men who failed in a nation that worships success" (3). Sandage's story is an uncanny one, for it focuses on the paradox within the American Dream. This goes back to

> [a] century and a half ago [when] we embraced business as the dominant model for our outer and inner lives. Ours is an ideology of achieved identity; obligatory striving is its method, and failure and success are its outcomes. We reckon our incomes once a year but we audit ourselves daily, by standards of long forgotten origin. Who thinks of the old counting house when we "take stock" of how we "spend" our lives, take "credit" for our gains, or try not to end up "third rate" or "good for nothing"? Someday, we hope, the "bottom line" will show that we "amount to something." By this kind of talk we "balance" our whole lives, not just our accounts. (264-265)

8 According to Sandage, the consequences of this cult of (economic) success are double-edged and devastating. Indeed, if personal value is to be measured by someone's tangible results

> [t] he losers among us, people who bear failure as an identity, embody the American fear that our fondest hopes and our worst nightmares may be one and the same. (277)

9 As early as 1932, O'Neill had conveyed similar meanings by having Faust face his "monstrous double" (Girard 152 ff), Mephistopheles, who may well wear

> the Mephistophelean mask of the Face of Faust. For is not the whole of Goethe's truth *for our time* just that Mephistopheles and Faust are one and the same—*are* Faust? (*Memoranda* 118)

10 Accordingly, O'Neill's new generation of multifaceted and wretched salesmen, who stake their souls for the sake of material success, has inevitably signed its Faustian pact. The first is Andrew Mayo, the would-be farmer of *Beyond the Horizon* who turns to business in order to cope with the frustration over his unfulfilled homely dreams. The fact that Andrew has sold his soul to money-making compensations is visually rendered through the typically O'Neillian correlative of physical metamorphosis. At first, Andrew's "old easy-going good-nature seems to have been partly lost in a breezy, business-like briskness of voice and gesture" (1:618). Then, as the play unfolds, his face becomes increasingly "high-strung, hardened" (639). When Andrew is eventually called to his brother's deathbed, his physical, hence moral, change is accomplished. His Faustian figure has become Mephistophelean. As Virginia Floyd records, O'Neill was fascinated by Andrew's character, who in *Beyond the Horizon* is a secondary figure, to the point he planned to write a sequel to the play, "taking up the 'Beyond the Horizon' situation where that play leaves off—The play of Andrew" (qtd. in Floyd, 30).

11 Having set aside the sequel of *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill chose to shift the play's main theme into a different setting and situation. *The Great God Brown*, written in 1925, resumes the Faust-Mephistopheles leitmotiv by featuring the rivalry between a businessman and an artist, William Brown and Dion Anthony, who, although not related by blood, "get [...] to be like twins" (2:526). Jealous of Dion Anthony, his talented

childhood friend, William Brown curbs Dion's creativity by employing him in his successful business activity. Dion, tortured inside by his frustrated sensitivity, yields to bitterness and cynicism, becomes as one with the increasingly Mephistophelean expression of the mask he wears throughout the play, and dies. Brown takes his place, becomes him, and is killed by a squad of policemen/Erinyes who believe he is his double. As in "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed"—where, remarkably, the antinomy poet/businessman is finally reunited in Simon Hartford's split personality—here, and ostensibly in *Days without End* too, O'Neill's keen portrayal of businessmen and salesmen enmeshes again with shadows from the playwright's personal past, thus triggering both the insightfulness and the failure of O'Neill's achievement. If, according to O'Toole, O'Neill's aborted cycle is haunted by the ghost of the playwright's Irish father as "a romantic actor stripped of his role," which causes the "simian Irishman [to] come out from behind the fancy play-actor" (49), the theme of the equal competitors or "monstrous doubles" clearly echoes O'Neill's ambivalent relationship with his brother Jamie, whose fondness of the playwright was always tainted by mutual antagonism.

12 Not until *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill's 1939 masterpiece featuring a salesman who almost succeeds in selling his life-lie by deploying the sly techniques of his profession, could the playwright reach a successful balance between topical issues and the "intruder from the shadows" (Watt 24) of his past that sabotaged them. I believe that Ferdiando Fasce's introduction to the 2005 Italian edition of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can be useful in order to understand the manner and the extent of O'Neill's achievement in this play. Fasce, an Italian historian, looks back at the history of salesmanship in America, in order to make his point, whereby Willy Loman's tragedy would lie in Willy's incapacity to cope with the rapid development of the nineteenth-century "drummer" figure into a professional salesman and further on into a white collar worker. According to Fasce, Willy Loman is an in-between character, torn between the drummer's restlessness and the white collar worker's sedentariness, and between the former's cult of personality and the latter's reliance on Dale Carnegie strategies of "emotional engineering" (qtd. in Fasce 42).[1] O'Neill's Hickey, instead, could fittingly epitomize Fasce's description of the drummer, a somewhat derogatory term indicating the pre-war predecessors of modern salesmen, who embodied what the sociologist David Riesman defined as an "other-directed personality" (qtd. in Fasce 29), and pursued a success still "founded on individual and independent initiative" (32). Such "craftsmen of personality" (34) were

> heirs both to the peddlers [...], and, above all, to the urban brokers/barkers [...] who, in pre-war times, used to meet their wholesale agents [...], and to spend with them entire days, fun nights and mornings of intense business negotiations, aimed at talking them into purchasing the products of the companies that hired them. (35)

13 These "lively master[s] of popular entertainment and face-to-face manipulation, pioneer[s] of a noisy and roguish promotion strategy" (36) were generally independent, worked on commission, and lived mostly on the road.

> Their individual success, which at this stage may well achieve conspicuous proportions, is grounded on their intangible, experience-based capacity to adapt themselves to widely different circumstances, people and transactions: to be [...]'all that is possible for all men', and for women too, if we have to give credit to their alleged reputation as 'seducers' of housewives and housekeepers. [...] Still, the drummers' existence is not limited to the road, nor to the endless series of fleeting and occasional intercourse, underpinned, according to contemporary press, by alcoholic binges, gambling and love affairs. Instead, it perpetually wrestles with the

> instinct to settle down, and to have, and then leave home, a family and a wife who live in constant anxiety and trouble, forever waiting for their husbands to return. (36-38)

14 Although set in the timeless dimension of Harry Hope's bar, Hickey's characterization closely corresponds to Fasce's description of the drummer, for instance when, in his final confession, Hickey tells his "old pals" (O'Neill 3:707) about the protean quality of his "knack" for selling, inherited from his father, the "tight old bastard" (694) who could sell "nothing for something" (693).

> Hickey—[...] I knew I could kid people and sell things. It was like a game, sizing people up quick, spotting what their pet pipe dreams were, and kidding 'em along that line, pretending you believed what they wanted to believe about themselves. Then they liked you, they trusted you, they wanted to buy something to show their gratitude. It was fun. (695-696)

15 O'Neill's drummer also talks about his solitude in "[t]he damned hotel rooms", where he would "get seeing things in the wall paper", which fostered his womanizing habits ("What I'd want was some tramp I could be myself with without being ashamed", 696). Again, Hickey explains his initial liking for salesmen because "[t]hey were sports. They kept moving" (695). Above all, the plan Hickey enacts to persuade his friends to put an end to their pipe-dreaming also draws on his profession. Empathy ("I know exactly what you're up against, [...] I've been through the mill", 760) and false friendliness ("You know the one thing I want is to see you happy before I go", 689) are, indeed, essential to the strategy the drummer turns to when it comes to giving away his life-lie disguised as a messianic purpose. Hickey—"[h]is expression [...] fixed in a salesman's winning smile of self confident affability and hearty good fellowship"—deploys his "salesman's mannerism if speech, [...] easy flow of glib, persuasive convincingness" (607) in order to talk his friends into endorsing his ultimate illusion. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that this is not about a new life but about death itself.

> Larry—[...] for Death was the Iceman Hickey called to his home! (667)

16 To conclude, I believe that in his biographic and artistic maturity, and especially in plays such as *The Icemen Cometh* and *Hugie*, O'Neill could finally solve the inner-versus-outer-world dilemma by successfully using his characters' historical and social background as a prop for further speculation into symbolic and even metaphysical meanings. In *The Icemen Cometh*, in particular, O'Neill takes his cue from the ambivalence he saw encoded in the selling profession and convincingly makes his point as to the uncanny liminality that exists between selling and betraying, between sale and self-sale, and between salvation and deception. In his introduction, Fasce maintains that

> the drummers compound the constant tension between the growing need for accuracy that an increasingly bigger, more complicated and synergic business world requires, and the inborn calling to adventure and disorder [...] with the tension between the rhythms and habits of the public dimension and those, altogether different, of family life. (38)

17 Correspondingly, I regard O'Neill's tale of his ill-fated drummer, whose tragedy originates in the ambiguity encoded both in Hickey's profession and in his family sphere, as the play in which O'Neill could finally master what Matthew Roudané calls the "talismanic power of the theatre to trigger public awareness and private insight" (5), thereby coming to achieve the balance between "public issues" and "private

tensions" that he had long been searching through his developing portrayals of salesmen and businessmen.

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NOTES

1. This and the following translations from Ferdinando Fasce's introduction are mine.

ABSTRACTS

Taking my cue from Edmund's remark in *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* that "[s]tammering is the native eloquence of us fog people", in the pages that follow I will be questioning Wittgenstein's seventh proposition. "What we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence" by concerning myself with O'Neill's insightful, if dim, intuition as to the connection that that exists between what Scott Sandage calls America's "ideology of achieved identity", whose outcome is *either* tangible success *or* existential failure, and the self-dispossession that comes as a consequence of self-deception. I will do this by outlining the development of two key figures that haunt both O'Neill's work and his country's identity quest, namely, the businessman—who restlessly tries to buy his soul—and the salesman—who is equally eager to sell his—from their initial rendering in early one-act melodramas, through the failure of O'Neill's ambitious cycle of plays "Tales of Possessors Self-Dispossessed", all the way to *The Iceman Cometh*, in which the playwright could finally master what Matthew Roudané calls the "talismanic power of the theatre to trigger public awareness and private insight."

Dans *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, un personnage déclare: "[s]tammering is the native eloquence of us fog people". Cette réplique d'Edmund nous amènera à nous interroger sur la septième proposition de Wittgenstein selon laquelle "ce dont on ne peut pas parler, il faut le passer sous silence" et à considérer alors les rapports entre l'intuition sombre, mais néanmoins perspicace, d'O'Neill et ce que Sandage nomme "l'idéologie de la finitude identitaire" propre aux Etats Unis se traduisant soit par la réussite matérielle soit par l'échec existentiel et la dépossession de l'être comme conséquence de son aveuglement. Afin de mettre en évidence ces différents rapports, j'étudierai deux figures majeures qui hantent non seulement l'œuvre d'O'Neill mais également la culture américaine dans sa quête d'identité : l'homme d'affaire qui, sans relâche, tente de s'acheter une âme et le vendeur qui est, à l'inverse, toujours prêt à vendre la sienne. Mon étude portera sur les mélodrames de jeunesse d'O'Neill puis à "Tales of Possessors Self-Dispossed", ambitieux cycle de pièces qui s'avéra être un échec dramatique, et enfin sur *The Iceman Cometh*, où l'auteur parvient alors à maîtriser ce que Matthew Roudané appelle "le pouvoir

talismanique du théâtre qui engendre une prise de conscience chez le spectateur et lui ouvre des perspectives de perception qui lui sont personnelles."

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Mots-clés: théâtre américain, vendeur, vente, homme d'affaire, affaires, Faust, Mephistopheles
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